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Conclusion and discussion: Navigating marriage, beyond dichotomies



Conclusion

The omnipresent political and public discussions about the relationship between Islam and the West frequently take place in terms of gender and gender relations. In this, Muslim women are often portrayed as homogenous, unchanging entities and mere passive victims of their culture and religion. I argue that this is a limited way of looking at these women and is based on recurring ideas of what I'd like to refer to as non-existing and counterproductive dichotomies that run parallel to each other: agency versus structure, us versus them, autonomy versus culture and modernity versus tradition. In these dichotomies, homogenous entities are created and placed in opposition to each other. In this way, an Other is created, which places the women in this thesis on the same side: confined by structures, defined by culture and tradition.

These dichotomies do not do justice to the unstable, constantly shifting and fragmenting social reality. In other words, they restrict our understanding of social reality. We only see a certain frame and this averts our eyes from the bigger picture: that of an individual living in a broader context and the constant interaction which shapes the individual. Framing at this point in time takes place especially along the line of culture: the framing of a cultural Other. With regard to Muslim women, this process of Othering is along the lines of religion and culture. First, this distracts our gaze from other explanatory elements as the position of these women is discussed within the boundaries of their minority group. What is absent, is the role of the broader socio-political context and the dynamics between the individual, the minority group and the socio-political context. Second, it also averts our eyes from 'our' own position.

As I have argued, the position of Muslim women is discussed through different issues. Veiling has been a central focus of public, political and subsequently social scientific debate, especially from 2001 onwards. At the moment however, there seem to be other issues at the forefront, especially in the Netherlands, such as forced marriage, child marriage, polygamous marriage, religious marriages and cousin marriage. Thus, the unifying theme through which the position of Muslim women is discussed at this point in time, is marriage. In relation to primarily Muslim countries, marriage is discussed in terms of the extent to which Islam(ic law) can relate to there being equal rights between men and women. In Europe, marriage is discussed in relation to migration marriages, marriage customs and integration. In this, the position of Muslim women is yet again discussed, though you might say that this is in a somewhat concealed manner. I observe a gap here between the social scientific debates regarding Muslim women and agency on the one hand and the political and public debates on the other; the debates appear to take place more or less independently of each other. In social sciences, much is written about the agency of Muslim women, also regarding veiling. And while the concerns surrounding marriage might seem a new discussion, the underlying elements are the same. In other words: old arguments are paraded as new ones.

It is thus that Muslim women and marriage form the central themes in this thesis. In Part One, set in Morocco and Part Two set in the Netherlands, I zoom in on a few topics in relation to marriage that are highly debated in politics, in the media and public forums today: cousin marriage, forced abandonment and women's rights in divorce. I posed the central question: *How do Muslim women in Northeast Morocco and Dutch Turkish and*

Moroccan women in the Netherlands navigate marriage? In answering this question, this thesis aims to contribute to both the social scientific debate and the political and public debate, at a point of time when the debates and feelings of Us versus Them is becoming ever more tense with the constant arrival of refugees and the recent IS attacks in Europe.

As the central question of this thesis implies, it is not so much a question as to *if* Muslim women navigate, but *how* they navigate. In responding to this question I seek to avoid the general homogenization of these women. In debates in social sciences I have, therefore, positioned myself alongside feminists who portray Muslim women as being active agents in their daily lives. Not denying the influence that social forces can pose, but at the same time emphasizing the women's agency and questioning the way this agency is often merely seen as resistance to men, culture and religion, I argue that the way we could perceive women as active agents should be seen as much more than that (Abu-Lughod 2002, Mahmood 2005).

The chapters in this thesis address the narratives of Muslim women and describe and examine the changing contexts in which they exist; it is the interrelation between these two that specifically interested me. The overarching concept which binds the studies in this thesis together is *social navigation* (Vigh 2006, 2009), a concept which underlines movement: the movement of social environments and the movement of people. More specifically, it points to how these two interact: "the way we move in a moving environment" (Vigh 2009: 420). The use of this concept to look at the themes in this thesis is new, as it is usually applied to situations of volatile change such as (post) war countries. However, as Vigh also argues, it is more broadly applicable. As the discussions on the relationship between agency and structure continue, this concept adds different perspectives to the discussion, questions which themselves stimulate more discussion. By zooming in on the interactivity, both agency and structure are a given, and by doing this Vigh aims to go beyond any simple dichotomy.

The contexts or social environments in this thesis (Morocco and the Netherlands) might seem relatively stable at first sight but, on closer examination, the social changes become apparent and one can identify them, in Vigh's terms, as moving. I typify Morocco and the Netherlands as societies on the move. It is not so much that the societies as a whole are in flux, but that aspects regarding marriage, the position of women and for the Netherlands, the position of Muslims in a multicultural society, are in perpetual movement. Institutional changes have an impact on marriage practices and these are in constant movement. The women in this thesis can be confronted with constraints or social forces at an individual level, whether this is on an institutional level (who you can/cannot marry, immigration laws), or on a symbolic level (ideas within society and family about how women should behave). As such, the concept does not only refer to the movement of social environments, it importantly also relates to the social position of women and the degree of control over the social forces that they experience (Vigh 2009: 430). Thus, it also refers to the agency that women have and experience, which differs greatly per individual, regardless of the context.

Part One of the thesis, set in Morocco, discusses several aspects of marriage. **Chapter Two** on consanguinity in Morocco, shows how women navigate medical risk within the ideal of marriage. Being married is an aspiration held by the women themselves and, at the same time, is an expectation of society. Marrying a cousin has been a common practice and the

medical risk attached to this practice is now in discussion. Within the complex of expectations, personal aspirations and medical risks, women face a risk which is experienced broadly: not just as a medical risk, but a social risk too: the risk of not marrying or the risk of marrying without the support of relatives. **Chapter Three** on returning migrants and abandoned children shows how mothers of abandoned children navigate in order to give their children a better future. The mothers, often situated in socially and economically difficult situations seek ways of escape. Not so much for themselves, but to secure a better future for their children. They do so by questioning the fundamental rights of belonging and transmitting their feelings of non-belonging in Morocco and belonging in the Netherlands onto their children and fight to live abroad in the Netherlands or to have a Dutch passport. In **Chapter Four** women navigate divorce proceedings after the reform of the Islamic Family Law, a law which gives them more rights on paper. In daily life the access to, and use of, the new rights differ for women. On an institutional level there are notions of femininity, to which some women want or need to act. There are also constraints at an economic level. The way they defend their interests does not necessarily have to relate to the rights given. According to their own social position, they choose ways of dealing with the current situation and try to secure a (future) position in society that is in their best interests.

Part Two, situated in the Netherlands, discusses cousin marriage among Dutch Moroccan and Dutch Turkish women. In the Netherlands, the majority population regards marriage between cousins as incestuous and a practice which invites the risk of having disabled offspring; it is, therefore, taboo. **Chapter Five** zooms in on the debates about medical risk and forced marriage in relation to cousin marriage and shows how women navigate partner choice and medical risk within these debates. Marriage ideals such as a preference for cousin marriage are defined and perceived as restricting (primarily Muslim women's) partner choices. However, the stories related by the women show how marriage practices are changing, and how ideals of love and traditional marriage customs can be combined. The women in the study show that it is the discussions on medical risk and the law to counteract marriage force, that is perceived as confining, rather than the marriage practices themselves. **Chapter Six** shows how women navigate risk perception in relation to partner choice. The chapter zooms further in on the Dutch Moroccan and Dutch Turkish respondents, not only the second generation but also the first generation shows the changes in views on and practice of cousin marriage among Dutch Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands, between generations. Constraints are strongly presented in terms of medical risk and restricted partner choice. However, what is considered a risk by one person can be perceived quite differently by another. The women navigate within this complex of personal risks at medical, religious and social levels and perceived dominant risks at societal level. Thus, the practice and preference of marrying a member of one's kin is not a static or fixed phenomenon but a social construct that is transformed by interaction, time and context. **Chapter Seven** zooms in on medical risk and specifically addresses the way that women navigate choices related to the medical risk regarding preconception carrier screening and reproductive options. With the aim of having children, healthy children, the women think about or act within the Dutch medical debate through their interpretations of Islam.

Discussion

The stories recounted in this thesis show the heterogeneity and dynamics that exist among the women themselves: the differences in different contexts (Morocco and the

Netherlands), the differences between generations and the differences within generations, the differences between women. The women show how they, as Abu-Lughod (2002) argues, can make choices that they see fit (after being 'freed'), which might not conform to what is expected of them, as, for example, the women in divorce proceedings in Chapter Four show. In other words, agency lies in having the opportunity to hold different views and positions, as the women in this thesis do.

It is the accumulation of the places Muslim women are ascribed to in the aforementioned dichotomies that weighs heavily. These dichotomies are created and therefore non-existent. The dichotomy between 'culture' and 'autonomy' is based on an idealised version of our ideals of freedom and autonomy among 'us' and the denial of agency of particularly Muslim women (De Koning et al. 2014). Likewise, the dichotomy of 'modernity versus tradition' is not workable: 'modernity' is created within 'tradition' and 'tradition' is 'modern' compared with 'tradition' in earlier times. For instance, while cousin marriage is often addressed as a traditional marriage form, the stories in Chapters Five and Six show how marriage patterns are interpreted in their current context and how marriage patterns can evolve over time and might even bridge issues that were previously regarded as being mutually exclusive: marrying your cousin out of love without family or parental interference. To return to navigation. Whilst I have illustrated how women navigate, the question is: in what direction do women navigate? The point is, that this is not fixed, like terms such as 'modernity' suggest. Navigating is inherent in being human, it is something that has always been done, by everyone, and it underlies cultural change. So first, we have a homogeneous portrayal which diverts our eyes from change and diversity. Second, by thinking in oppositions, we think in differences rather than similarities. The way cousin marriage is addressed in the Netherlands is a prime example of this: by ascribing cousin marriage to Others (Muslims), cousin marriages among native Dutch are ignored, as are similar issues such as medical risks.

The dichotomies are therefore counterproductive because, when important issues are addressed like women's rights in general, forced marriage, abandoned children and mothers, medical risk in case of consanguinity (and they should be addressed), these labels do not do justice to social reality.

By producing this thesis I not only aim to contribute to the social scientific debate, through this social scientific work I also aim to contribute to the political and public discussion surrounding the position of Muslim women. The issues raised in politics and public are real and should be addressed. Several studies have demonstrated that issues like marriage force do take place. Moreover, they *are* addressed, not only in politics and by organizations but also by the groups, and particularly the women themselves. The (self) organizations in Morocco and in the Netherlands – through which I conducted part of the research stand amidst the communities. They observe and address these issues and have done this for years. First of all, I'd like to make a case for these organisations, who have difficulty continuing their important work because of finances, and, in the Netherlands, who have faced specific financial cutbacks.

Second, I return to political and public discussions on Muslim women, I feel a growing discomfort regarding how these issues are addressed, particularly in politics in the Netherlands and the way this resonates in society. I observe an increasing tendency to

create a cultural Other, as these groups and the women are ascribed to the same side of dichotomies which are, as I have argued, non-existent and counterproductive. Meanwhile We do not see what these women (and men) are doing themselves and the dynamics they create in their social environment. Moreover, since We place ourselves on the other side of the dichotomy, we are prone to have feelings of superiority that also blinds Us from issues of our own that need addressing. I therefore argue that these labels should not be a premise on which to base interventions and laws.

Thus, there is an unmistakable tension here, a tension between addressing issues and creating a cultural Other. For instance, in case of a forced marriage, because of a joint background (e.g. Moroccan, Turkish or Muslim) the whole group is addressed. For a group that is already stigmatised, addressing an issue in terms of the group (again), reinforces the processes of Othering. A crucial point here, is that we lack a discourse on the basis of which we can address issues such as marriage force without stigmatising certain groups (a point similarly addressed by Coene, Longman 2005; Leye, Longman 2011; Razack 2004). I opt, following Leye and Longman (2011) and Coene and Longman (2005), for a discussion from a feminist-universal perspective, in which issues like marriage force and forced abandonment are discussed as an expression of gender discrimination. In this, 'culture should not be ignored, but atoned with the principal of gender equality' (Leye, Longman 2011: 6). How to reconcile the two, deserves further research. Importantly, this should not remain a scientific debate, a debate is necessary to establish how such an approach could be translated into policy and practice.

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